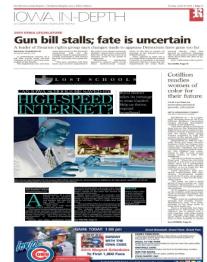


Title: **HIGH-SPEED INTERNET?**

Author: JASON CLAYWORTH AND RODNEY WHITE JCLAYWORTH@DMREG.COM

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CAN IOWA SCHOOLS BE SAVED BY **HIGH-SPEED INTERNET?**

Rural district
takes its message
to state Capitol:
Help us thrive,
expand
broadband

**JASON CLAYWORTH
AND RODNEY WHITE**

JCLAYWORTH@DMREG.COM

Administrators of a rural school in far northern Iowa believe technology can temper the pain rising from Iowa's lost schools crisis. And they took their message to the Capitol this month.

"Everyone is mourning the loss of their schools when, instead, we should focus on the future of education and how to revolutionize education," said John Carver, superintendent of Howard-Winneshiek schools.

Carver and other employees from Howard-Winneshiek advocate that Iowa promote and invest in broadband so that

every corner of the state has access to high-speed Internet.

Many Iowa schools are already connected to the Iowa Communications Network, a high-speed fiber optic network run by the state. That's a bright spot for Iowa.

The stumbling block is that homes and businesses in some pockets of the state do not have access to high-speed Internet.

The website Broadbandnow rates Iowa as the 33rd most connected state in the nation, but also notes that 20 percent of the state's population remains underserved. More than 500,000 people in Iowa

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ONLINE

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are without access to Internet speeds that are generally considered suitable for interactive video, Broadbandnow estimates.

That means that activities such as instantaneous video conferencing — a key component of on-

line learning — are difficult or impossible for those people.

Such connectivity can help districts expand online learning options.

And there's additional incentive beyond an educational renaissance: It's possible that online

schooling could allow districts such options as to those people.

That idea could save tax-payers millions of dollars

in transportation and building costs, Carver said.

closed an elementary school last year and will close another after this school year due to attendance and financial pressures. Iowa has closed 4,314 school districts since 1950. The time to act is now, he said.

ONLINE

Watch a short video of state legislators and Howard-Winneshiek school officials demonstrating online school connectivity at **DesMoinesRegister.com**.

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Several Howard-Winneshiek officials spent much of their day April 9 connecting lawmakers with students via a high-speed Internet connection at the Capitol, a 189-mile commute made in nanoseconds. The school already uses the connections to supplement class instruction. They wanted to showcase the technology to promote its expansion.

There is political will on the issue. President Barack Obama and Gov. Terry Branstad have both been recent advocates of broadband expansion in Iowa. And Connect Iowa, a partnership with the Iowa Economic Development Authority, is one group that also advocates and provides help to communities seeking to expand high-speed Internet access.

"My fear is that we are going to miss an opportunity to become the global leader in education," Carver said.

Online schooling can be a touchy subject

Online learning isn't without controversy.

Online schools have been a legislatively touchy subject since they first appeared in 2012, centered on infrastructure concerns and whether students will obtain proper educational instruction.

Iowa currently allows two out-of-state and for-profit companies to partner with the Clayton Ridge Community School District in northeast Iowa and with the CAM Community School district in southwest Iowa. Those companies keep most of the \$6,366 per student

provided by the state to educate the roughly 700 Iowa K-12 students in those programs. (The schools had permission to sign up to 865 students in the current school year.)

Students in the online schools can be open enrolled and located anywhere in the state. They are taught by licensed teachers and must adhere to Iowa's hours of instruction requirements.

CAM Superintendent Casey Berlau said he believes the online schools have worked well for many of the students, but also cautions that they can't entirely replace traditional educational settings.

Online works well for some students who have learning or physical disabilities or in situations — like being part of nationally competitive sports or activities — that require they be away from home for long periods of time, Berlau noted.

"I tell people I think it's a really good option for some families and students but it's not for everybody," Berlau said.

Groups like the Urban Education Network, which consists of the state's eight largest school districts, have expressed concern. They believe Iowa school districts should be given the opportunity to offer the online curriculum rather than the current environment where more than \$4 million of public money is being diverted annually to out-of-state companies.

And so the contention continues.

A bill, House File 204, would have lifted a June 30, 2015, sunset for the two online schools but

died in the Iowa Senate this year, placing the future of the for-profit schools in question. However, the sunset issue could bypass the typical legislative process and be lifted through a line item to a last-minute budget bill.

Online learning: Gaining popularity

Iowa law does not prevent a district from offering classes online, but the schools must guarantee that the curriculum is taught by a licensed teacher and doesn't differ from the instruction students receive at the typical bricks and mortar schools.

Many Iowa schools have for decades been engaged in some form of online learning, made possible through the Iowa Communications Network that began operation more than 20 years ago.

Schools like Waterloo already meet state guidelines and teach some courses online. But areas of the state without access to high-speed Internet can hinder such options for many districts, said Gwen Nagel, an education technology consultant for the Iowa Department of Education.

Rep. Josh Byrnes, R-Osage, represents the district that includes Howard-Winn. He sees that part of the issue is the state fostering the growth of high-speed Internet.

"We have to get rid of that inequity" between the broadband haves and have-nots across the state, Byrnes said. "And the best way to do that is to get that fiber in the ground."

The Iowa Department of Education since 2004

has offered online high school classes in a special program that has doubled in size in the last year.

The program, known as Iowa Learning Online, is intended to provide a wider variety of classes and to help address teacher shortages or scheduling conflicts. It is paid for through state allocations, which means neither the student nor individual districts pay for the classes.

An education reform package approved by lawmakers in 2013 allocated \$4.5 million over three years to expand the program. In the last year, the program went from offering 9 courses with 12 teachers to 41 courses and 35 teachers. And, in that time, its former enrollment of around 700 students has doubled, with about 20 percent of the state's high schools participating.

The online program is promoted as an educational supplement, not as a replacement to traditional in-person instruction.

For now, most schools use online tools to assist in teaching or to provide elective courses that would otherwise be absent from a district's offerings, said Amy Williamson, an executive at the Iowa Department of Education who helps oversee online school learning.

"Many courses don't lend themselves naturally to being offered and taught well in an online setting," Williamson said. "That's not to say it can't be done, but it's not the preferred method of delivery for many of the courses."

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Des Moines Register is spending a year documenting the changes in Gowrie in northwestern Iowa between the Prairie Valley school district and the nearby Southeast Webster Grand district, which now have a grade-sharing agreement. The publication also is documenting the dissolution of the Corwith-Wesley district in far northern Iowa, a school with fewer than 110 students that is expected to permanently close at the end of this school year. Stories will be told in print, online and in a video documentary to be published by the Register and broadcast statewide on Iowa Public Television in August or September 2015.

ADD YOUR MEMORIES

Boarded-up and derelict buildings — documented in hundreds of Iowa's communities through submitted photos by Des Moines Register readers — showcase the haunting reality of what happens to many structures and communities that lose their schools. In three months, our readers have helped document nearly 4,000 of Iowa's once 13,433 public school houses, hundreds of which have photos. View the searchable database online and contribute your own memories, video and photographs on The Des Moines Register's interactive Lost Schools webpage at DesMoinesRegister.com/LostSchoolsShare. Read previous installments of the series at

DesMoinesRegister.com/LostSchools. Sign up for daily featured pictures by liking "Iowa's Lost Schools" on Facebook.

MEET THE JOURNALISTS

JASON CLAYWORTH is a graduate of Moulton-Udell High School, which is in a southern Iowa school district that has seen declining enrollment in recent years. He graduated from Drake University. He is an investigative journalist for the Register, where he has been on staff for 16 years. He can be reached at 515-699-7058, jclayworth@dmreg.com or on Twitter @JasonClayworth.

RODNEY WHITE has worked as a staff photographer at the Register since 2000. He has covered the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Super Bowl XL and the Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. He also traveled to Afghanistan and China on assignment covering Iowans worldwide. He can be reached at 515-284-8515 or RodWhite@dmreg.com



LOST SCHOOLS

A REGISTER SPECIAL REPORT ON SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION IN IOWA



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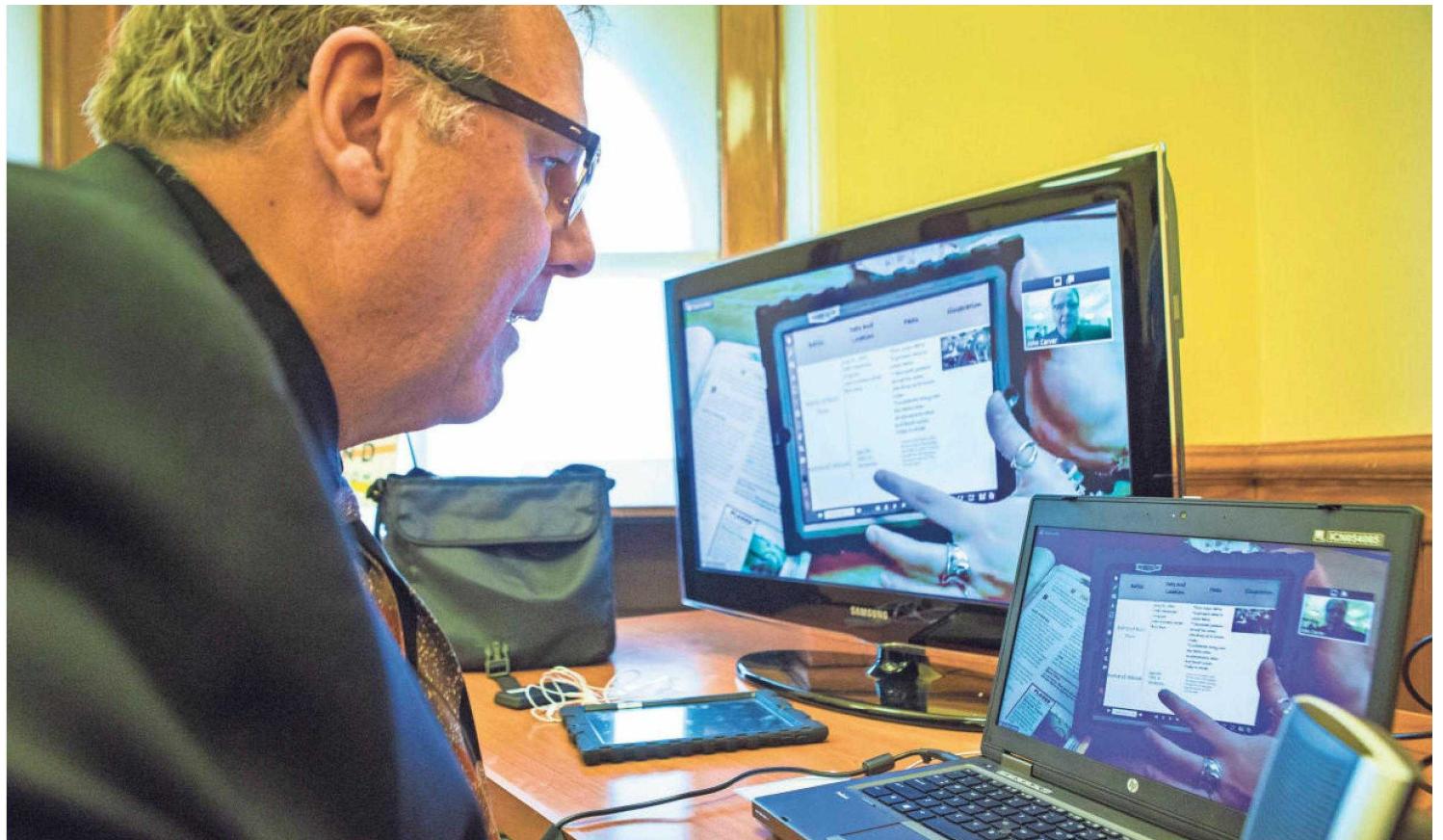
John Carver, superintendent of the Howard-Winnesieck school district, demonstrates for legislators the high-speed capabilities of virtual classroom learning April 9 at the Iowa Statehouse in Des Moines.

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Mark Felderman, deputy director of Legislative Affairs and Member Representation for Professional Educators of Iowa, works with teachers from the Howard-Winneshiek school district over a broadband connection April 9 at the Iowa Statehouse in Des Moines.